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ABSTRACT

Variations between standard and nonstandard dialects are described as they relate to teaching reading. Children, when they enter school, have developed patterns of oral language which affect their abilities to learn to read in proportion to the degree to which their language patterns vary from standard English. Studies have shown that while disadvantaged children have more poorly developed language skills than their middle-class counterparts, they can be given instruction which will raise these skills. Speech should be encouraged without correction of dialectal differences as mistakes by providing stimulating experiences such as field trips, book sharing, films, pictures, etc. Teaching methods such as those used in English as a second language programs may be used profitably in direct language skills instruction. (MS)

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The Language of the Disadvantaged: Etiology, Characteristics, and Suggested Intervention Techniques

Mark Twain once said, "Everyone talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it." The same statement might be made for oral language in the elementary school. This is one of the most neglected areas in the elementary school today.

The importance of oral language development might be highlighted through several avenues. One approach might be to simply state that ninety percent of the average person's language usuage is in the area of speaking and listening. Other language skills as reading and writing constitute the remaining ten percent.

Oral language and its importance to reading skill development is yet another approach. This is the approach which this presentation will take.

Since the advent of the Title Programs, much emphasis has been placed upon improving educational opportunities for underprivileged children. What have educators identified as the best means of improving educational opportunities for underprivileged children? Improving the ability of disadvantaged children to read has been one of the major objectives. Certainly this is a worthy goal for reading is central to learning.

More Title I money has been spent for the improvement of reading than any other single category. For the past 5 years, a massive search to find effective materials for disadvantaged or underprivileged children has been underway. We've been looking for reading materials to which disadvantaged children could relate, materials with which they could identify, materials

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which reflect their own backgrounds, materials with munti-ethic characters, materials with linguistic bases, etc. We've tried ITA, color reading, basal readers, individualized reading, programmed readers, linguistic readers, phonetic readers, reading kits, and many more.

And what have we accomplished with disadvantaged children? With disadvantaged children, many of whom are below national norms in reading, we have made average gains of 3 months for an entire school year. With the millions of dollars expended, we have elevated the average gain for disadvantaged children from 6 months to 9 months for each school year. Although this is progress, it is disappointing! Children with limited reading skills remain limited in learning skills.

We have failed to find the best approach, the best method, the best materials! Our failure, as educators, to produce the needed changed has led to a new concern led by the U. S. Commissioner of Education and entitled, "The Right to Read."

I don't pretend to know the answers to the reading dilema for disadvantaged children, but I would like to share some of my thoughts with you.

It was just two years ago I sat at the principal's desk in a California elementary school in the San Joaquin Valley. The turnover rate for the school was 94%. The school was located in the poor part of town. Fifty per cent of the children were on welfare and one-third of them were Mexican-American, some who spoke English and some who didn't. Needless to say, there were plenty of teaching challenges in the areas of reading and language.

Perhaps in attempting to improve skills for disadvantaged children, we have spent insufficient effort at one level of language development at the expense of another. Language development, as I'm sure you realize, progresses from one level to the next with the preceeding levels serving as foundations

for the more difficult areas. It is generally agreed that language proficiency procedes from this progression; listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Quoting from the book, Language Programs for the Disadvantaged,[1] which was written by a task force of the National Council of Teachers of English in 1965,

> "Everything known about language suggests that the improvement of writing and reading must be built upon instruction in oral English. Even more obvious is the fact that if children are to develop skill in using English dialects other than their own, they need oral instruction."

It is my contention that we have attempted to concentrate upon reading skills with disadvantaged children while neglecting the prerequisite language skills of listening and speaking.

Kenneth Goodman[2] in an artical entitled, "Dialect Barriers to Reading Comprehension" stated that, "The more divergence between the dialect of the learner and the dialect of learning, the more difficult will be the task of learning to read."

We have become aware of this dialectical discrepancy as we attempted to teach children whose primary language is other than standard English and have developed some interesting and successful ESL (English as a Second Language) programs. Another attempt to bridge the dialect chasm has been the study of ghetto dialects by linguists. Two outstanding books, in this field are, Teaching Black Children to Read[3] and Reading for the Disadvantaged.[4]

Skill in reading is definitely and specifically related to skill in the use of oral language. The middle class child comes to school with a listening vocabulary of from 2000 to 10,000 words. To this vocabulary, he has learned to associate a multiplicity of meaning. Generally the middle class child, reading then, becomes a task of learning to recognize in print, words which

are already in his speaking and listening vocabulary.

Learning to read implies self-fulfillment, academic achievement, and social mobility. Oral language development prepares underprivileged children for reading instruction by helping them to become familiar with the phonology and syntax sounds of standard English.

By the time a child comes to kindergarten his language patterns are well established. He has already learned to speak and use language as he has heard it in his neighborhood and home. This may be the vernacular of the region in which he lives, a combination of English and the foreign language of parents or the language of the street. He experiences difficulty in school because the language he hears there, and is expected to use, is different from the language that he has heard at home and in the community. This is confusing, as well as frustrating.

A look[5] at some of the syntactical differences, as reported by Baratz and Shuy, between Negro non-standard and standard English helps us to identify some of the subtle variations of speech.

VARIABLE	STANDARD ENGLISH	NEGRO NON-STANDARD
Linking verb	He is going.	He ___ goin'.
Possessive marker	John's cousin	John cousin.
Plural marker	I have five cents.	I got five cent__.
Subject expression	John lives in New York	John he live in New York.
Verb form	I drank the milk.	I drunk the milk.
Past marker	Yesterday he walked home.	Yesterday he walk home.
Verb agreement	He runs home.	He run home.
	She has a bicycle.	She have a bicycle.
Future form	I will go home	I'ma go home.
"If" construction	I asked if he did it.	I ask did he do it.
Negation	I don't have any.	I don't got none.
	He didn't go.	He ain't go.
Indefinite article	I want an apple.	I want a apple.
Pronoun form	We have to do it.	Us got to do it.
	His book.	He book.
Preposition	He is over at his friend's house.	He over to his friend's house.
	He teaches at Francis Pool.	He teach ___ Francis Pool.
Be	Statement: He is here	Statement: He be here

Do Do	Contradiction: No, he isn't.	Contradiction: No, he don't.

The teacher must be alert to the oral expression of students, for many of the differences in usage common to Spanish-speaking students exist because they make a direct translation from Spanish to English. The degree of Spanish language dominace over the student's English usuage or syntax. In addition, students whose dominant language is Spanish will have a strong accent. The teacher must understand that the students reinforce these nonstandard forms during their out-of-class activities. According to Hernandeg,[6] the following are some of the nonstandard usuage and pronunciation forms most common to Mexican-American students:

Usuage:
1. Use of the double negative.
   e.g., I don't see nobody.
2. Use of the double comparison.
   e.g., My brother is more taller.
3. Confusion of simple preterite with past participle.
   e.g., He should have went.
4. Consistent misuse of third person singular, present tense.
   e.g., He come to school everyday.
5. Use of the double subject.
   e.g., My father he is home.
6. Adding an unnecessary "s" to possessive form.
   e.g., He took mines and his.
7. Adding an unnecessary "s" to plural forms.
   e.g., The mens came to work every days this week.

Pronunciation:
1. Mispronunciation of final "ed"
   e.g., talk-ed, jumpt-ed.
2. Failure to pronounce final endings.
   e.g., jumpin', firs'.
3. Accent of words on the wrong syllable.
   e.g., perfecly, pos'office.
4. Difficulty with these English sounds:
   a. mees for miss
   b. Brauther for brother
   c. share for chair
   d. rread for read
   e. Espanish for Spanish
   f. bery for very
   g. verry for berry
   h. rize for rice
   i. cahp for cap

5. Use of combination of English and Spanish
   e.g., marketa, watcho

A number of studies have been conducted to study the oral language patterns of culturally different children. One study of kindergarten children by Thomas[7] showed that these children used shorter sentences with fewer words and less variety than children from higher social status groups. It also revealed a deficiency in the amount, correctness, and maturity of their oral expression. Thomas also found that children from low socioeconomic areas used approximately 50 per cent of the words found in three leading basal first grade readers. Lower socio-economic group children made no use of approximately 20 to 50 per cent of such word lists as the International Kindergarten Union, Dolch, Gates, Rinsland, and Thorndike.

There are many other studies which report similar findings. It becomes clear, then, that if the level of oral language is not improved, one should not expect much change in the area of reading.

If a classroom teacher is committed to the development of oral language as a necessary link to improve reading and learning skills, where does she begin? She must begin with a total acceptance of the child's language and provide many opportunities for him to speak in a meaningful way.

The teacher should not see her purpose as passing judgement on the language or the culture which a child brings to school with him. The teacher's purpose is to help the disadvantaged child acquire additional language skills which enable him to function in school. As the child acquires facility in the use of standard English, he must be helped to recognize levels of appropriateness and taste in the use of language. It must be recognized that the child must continue to communicate freely and effectively with his own culture in his own dialect.

One of the first steps in raising the child's level of nonstandard English is to encourage speech of any kind in an atmosphere of acceptance

and psychological safety. Any correction from the teacher in the preliminary stages may cause the child to refrain from talking at all. Branding the child's language as being "wrong" or "unacceptable" accomplishes only adverse results.

The activities selected will depend upon the age of the child and his linguistic fluency. A child needs to develop a feeling of self-confidence and a willingness to attack more difficult tasks. This can be developed through participation in simple activities or games which are easily handled, prove enjoyable, and through which the child can experinece success.

There are many, many approaches which can utilized to get children to talk in the classroom. Because of obvious limitations, only a few will be mentioned.

Since many disadvantaged children have limited experiences, the topics about which children can talk may be limited. A variety of real experiences can lead to vocabulary development as the child seeks out the needed words to talk about something he has seen or done. Experiences which are common to the whole group stimulate discussion both in and out of the classroom. What can we talk about?

Pictures are excellent sources of speech stimulaters and can be used in a variety of ways.[8]

1. Give each child a picture. He can tell about the picture as he shows it to the other children. Pictures found in magazines are suitable for this purpose.
2. Pictures which display emotions are excellent stimuli for speech.[9] Probing questions by the teachers may take such forms as:
   "How do you think this person feels?"
   "Have you ever felt like this?"
   "What words can you think of to describe this feeling?"
   An individual child may create an imaginary story based on the picture and relate it to a small group or an additive story may be initiated by a child and the picture passed along to other children as they continue and elaborate on the previous contributions by others.

Classroom Experiences can be planned to stimulate talking.[10]

1. An animal brought to the classroom can stimulate talking and the children can dictate a story to the teacher. Hamsters, snakes, even tropical fish can serve as stimulators for speech.
2. Eating an interesting food is exciting. Try fortune cookies, Chinese noodles, or pretzels.
3. Recorded stories such as the The Reluctant Dragon read by Boris Karloff or Carl Sandburg's reading of his Rootabaga Stories can serve as stimuli for conversation.

Field Experiences take the children out of the classroom to observe things farther afield. Change in environment helps provide talking topics. Experiences might include:

Nature walks in a park or around the neighborhood can help children to make discoveries. Children might look for the many different colors they see on their walk or the different kinds of sounds which they hear.

Other trips might include visits to the :

Post Office

Fire Station

Police Station

Supermarket

Filmed Materials such as short films, filmstrips, as well as slides, are useful in working with small groups who are encouraged to react to the pictures presented.

The Weston-Woods films are excellent. Such films present familiar stories from children's literature such as "The Doughnuts" from Homer Price by Robert McCloskey, and "Millions of Cats" by Wanda Gag. "A Snowy Day" by Ezra Jack Keats is expecially amusing.

Non-verbal films, which are recent arrivals on the educational market, can be used with excellent results.

Two criteria should be applied to any item usage which is selected for emphasis in the elementary school:

1. How much social penalty does the item bear:
2. How frequent is its use.

The teacher should discover the individual problems with usage which his students have. Children should not spend their time learning the fine points of "shall" and "will" when they still habitually say "I done gone" or "I have went".

A longitudinal study of children's language by Loban, indicates that the use of verbs is the most frequent kind of deviation from conventional form found in the elementary school. Lack of agreement between subject and verb is one of the major difficulties. Verb tense is another common problem.

The following verbs have been suggested by the Syracuse schools as those which should receive the greatest amount of attention in the elementary school:

am, is, are, was, were, been, bring, brought, come, came, do, did, done, eat, ate, eaten, have no, haven't any, see, saw, seen.

The following exercises[11] may help a child in the area of subject-verb agreement:

1. Prepare tagboard cards on which are written singular and plural nouns (perhaps related to a study of the community)

   Two mailmen Three firemen Five pilots A rancer A baker

   On another set of cards of a different color, write singular and plural forms of the verb.

   help, helps walk, walks came, come saw, seen
   is, are was, were

Distribute the cards to individual children. Have the children with the name cards choose an appropriate verb card. Have the sentence read and the children decide whether it is correct.

2. Write "Actor" and "Action" in two columns on the chalkboard. Have the children suggest singular and plural forms of both "Actors" and "Actions". Under "Actions" write words which express action happening as of now (present) by or to the actor.

Actor	Action
car	go
cars	goes
bird	fly
birds	flies
man	walk
men	walks
boy	run
boys	runs

Ask the students to draw a circle around every final "s" in both columns. Lead them to discover that "s" added to a work in the actor column forms a plural, but when it is added to a word in the action column, it is singular. In the negative, the "s" form is not used.

He goes to school.
He doesn't go to school

Exercises which help children to discover the structure of language can serve as vehicles which propel children towards standard English usage. Sentence transformations might include building up sentences word by word, building sentences which follow certain patterns, and changing a sentence by substituting different words, but maintaining the same pattern.[12] The appropriateness of the activity depends upon the degree of linguistic fluency the child has. The effective teacher will determine this for each child.

A checklist for evaluating student progress which includes a number of language competencies to be evaluated can be devised by the teacher.

As the teacher listens to the child's speech, it can be analyzed for

the following:[13]

1. total verbal output
2. sentence patterns used
3. length of sentences
4. use of elements in the sentence (nouns, pronouns, verbs, infinitives, noun clauses, etc.)

A tape recorder can be a valuable asset in speech analysis. Recording group discussion is a recommended practice. The speech patterns of individuals can be analyzed at a later time. Many children are reluctant to speak if put in an individual situation with a tape recorder.

The concerned teacher will provide many opportunities for planned oral language development. Her teacher aide can be a valuable asset here, doubling the number of adults in the classroom for mediating language.

There are many other activities which can be utilized to promote oral language development.[14]

We can emphasize the use of oral language by:

1. Forgetting the desire for an absolutely quiet classroom.
2. Encouraging children to ask questions and to react to classroom experiences.
3. By using language lab equipment that involves listening and speaking activities.
4. Working with small groups so that proportionately more children can speak at any one time.
5. Planning for a high percentage of classroom time to be devoted to oral language.

Ideas which have been forwarded are not meant to outline a total program. Rather, some key ideas have been advanced which hopefully can

serve as beginning concerns for teachers. The resourceful teacher can utilize these ideas as catalysts for her own thinking and for the development of her own activities appropriate for oral language development. The utilization of additional activities as: choral reading, puppetry, creative dramatics, the Language Master, Telezonia, and expanded meanings offer other possibilities.

Early in this presentation, I mentioned the neglect of oral language development in elementary classrooms. I mentioned the meager gains in the teaching of reading which educators had made with disadvantaged children. Perhaps a few lines from Robert Frost's, "The Road Not Taken" are appropriate.

"Two roads diverged into the wood,
And I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all of the difference."

The teacher who wants to make a difference in the reading and learning level of disadvantaged children can do so through the development of a sound oral language program.